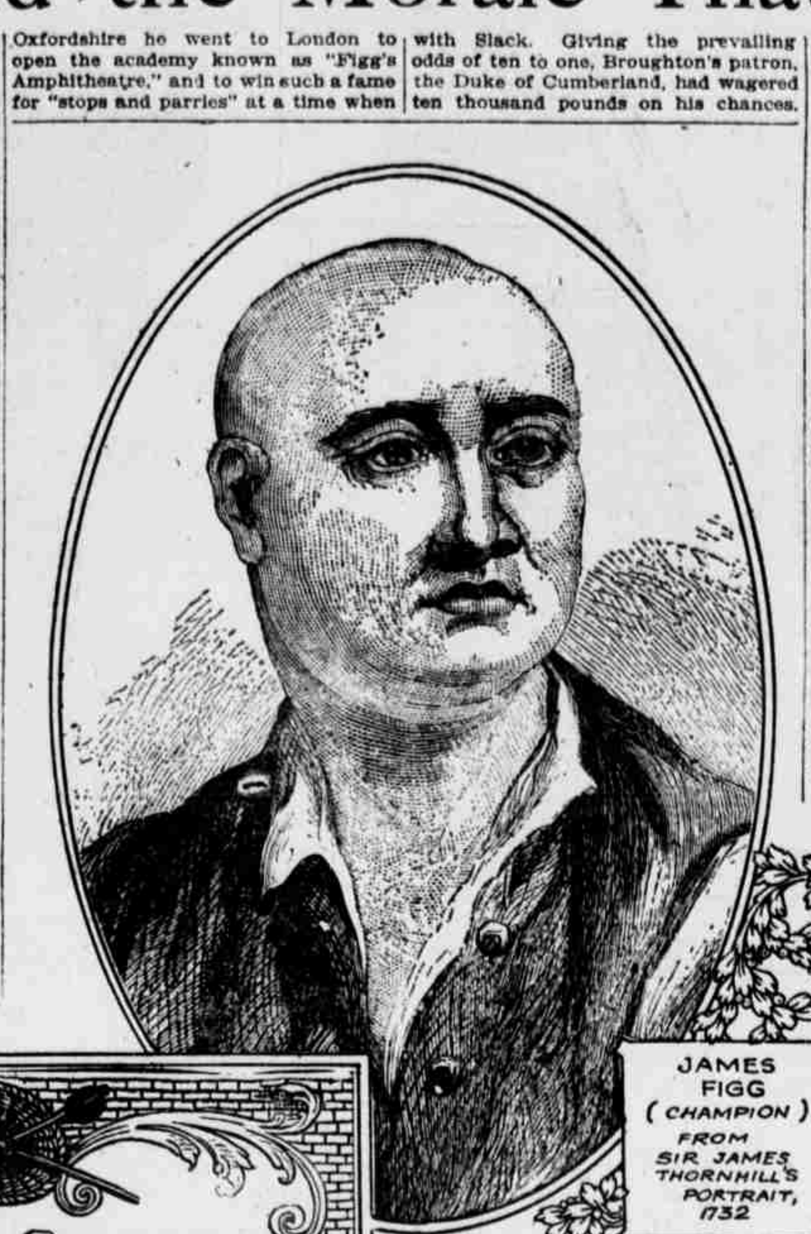
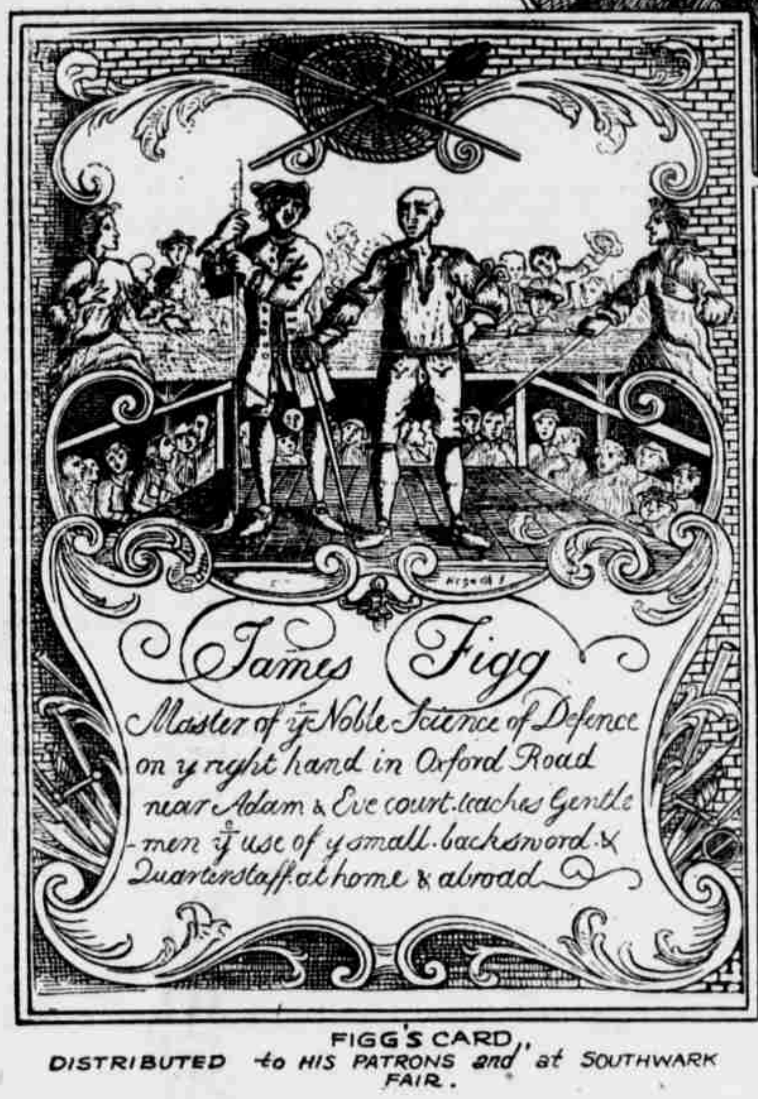
Personalities of the Old Prize Ring And the Morale That Is Our Heritage

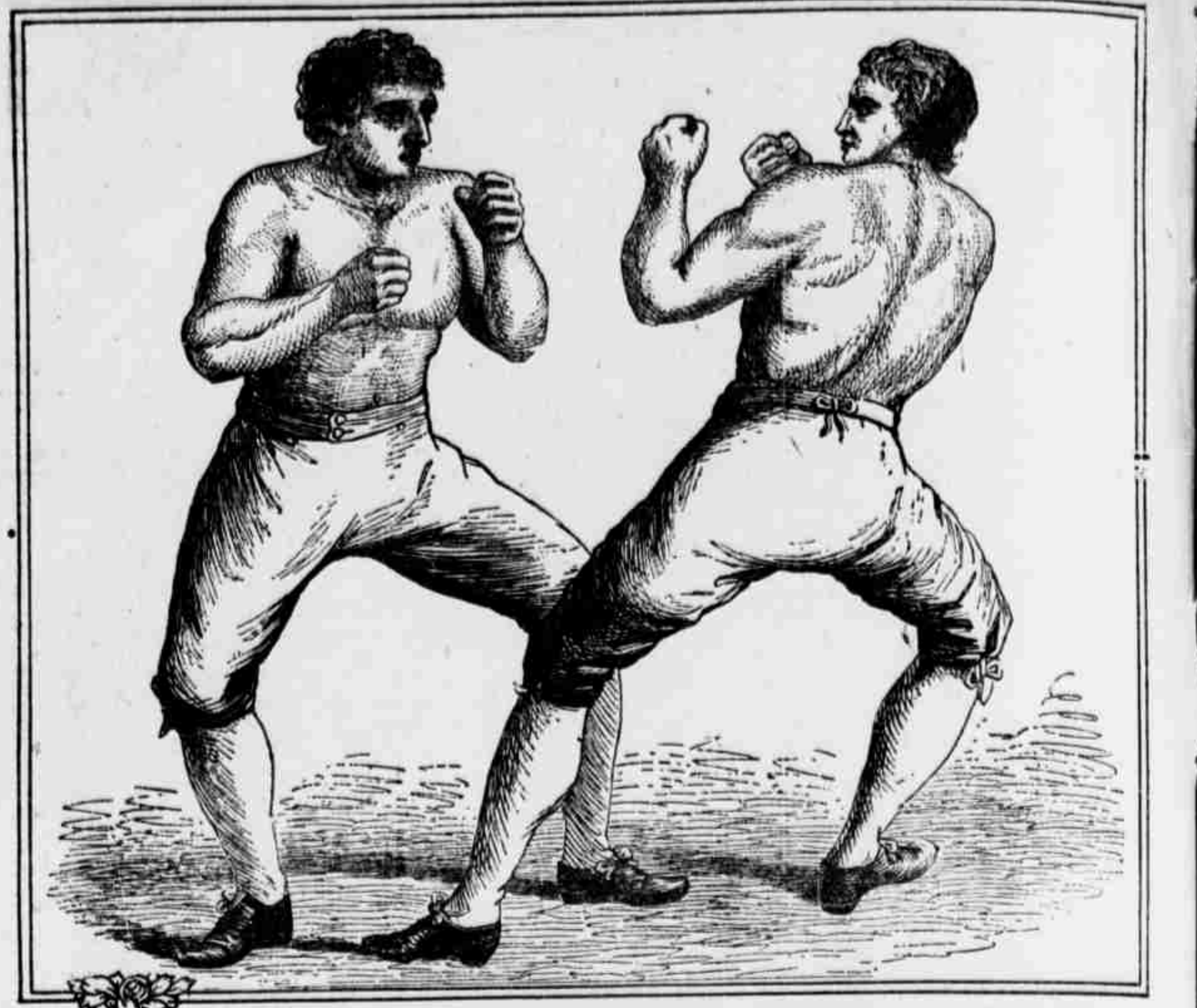
Military Authorities Keenly Appreciate Spirit of Unflinching Endurance Engendered by Pugilists of Long Ago, as Shown by Development of Boxing in France



JAMES FIGG (CHAMPION) FROM SIR JAMES THORNHILL'S PORTRAIT, 1732



FIGG'S CARD, DISTRIBUTED to HIS PATRONS and at SOUTHWARK FAIR.



THIRD FIGHT BETWEEN DANIEL MENDOZA and GEORGE HUMPHRIES, at DONCATER SEPTEMBER 29th, 1790.

THE metamorphosis that changed the French from a nation of duellists, more adept in the use of the rapier and pistol than in the use of nature's weapons of defence, was slow but certain. It was not the result of chance, but rather brought about by the insistent methods of a keen sighted General Staff, which worked so well that the French to-day are recognized not only as glorious soldiers with the weapons of war but skilled boxers and courageous fighters with gloves and fists in the ring.

Now Georges Carpentier, the idol of France, is about to step into the roped arena to cross gloves with Joe Beckett, the heavyweight champion of Great Britain, for the European title. The men will do battle in London early this winter. Shortly before Europe was forced to call every available man to the colors to stop the advance of the German hordes, Carpentier won the championship of Europe by knocking out Bombardier Wells, the British title holder at that time. The winner of the coming battle probably will be matched to fight Jack Dempsey, the world's champion.

Boxing, so far as Europe was concerned within a comparatively few years, was regarded as the exclusive field of the British. The French were patrons of the sport only so far as attending boxing entertainments was concerned. They did not box. Willie Lewis and other Americans went overseas and boxed around Paris and other French cities. They developed a few Frenchmen, who, following Yankee methods, won a few fights in England. Forthwith the volatile French simply seethed with enthusiasm. Everybody started to box.

Military France was delighted. Leaders of the army encouraged the sport. It was just exactly what was needed to harden the muscles and add to the morale of the nation. Every man should know how to fight and France welcomed boxing.

The Iron Duke of Wellington, being something of a snob, said that the battle of Waterloo had been won on the cricket fields of Harrow and Eton. The common people of England thought that it had been won on Moulsey Hurst. The latter day men— Heenan and Sayers, Poole and Morrissey, down through Ryan, Sullivan, Corbett, Fitzsimmons, Jeffries, Johnson, Willard and Dempsey—live merely in the traditions of the ring itself. Britain's famous fighters from 1798—such men as Gentleman Jackson, Belcher, Cribb, Mendoza and Pierce—to 1815 survive as almost historical figures.

The lives of these men stood for something, and that was just the one supreme thing which the times called for—an unflinching endurance which could bear up against a world in arms. Having set the example, they themselves often followed it. The doughty Tom Cribb served in the Royal Navy. Lifeguardsman Shaw, one of the best of the heavyweights, was cut to pieces by the French Cuirassiers at Waterloo. Victor Hugo in his splendid but lyrical description of the battle spoke of him as killing eleven men and then being killed in turn by a little French drummer boy. Even Joe Berks atoned for a life of brutality by dying greatly in the breach of Badajos.

Broughton and the Prussian Guard

But long before the days of the Napoleonic war fighters whose personalities have endured were associated with the ring. The father of modern boxing was James Figg, who flourished from 1719 to 1734. From his native Oxfordshire he went to London to open the academy known as "Figg's Amphitheatre," and to win such a fame for "stops and parries" at a time when the science was still in its infancy that he was frequently mentioned in the *Tatler, Guardsman* and *Craftsman*. When he passed a far greater man took his place in the person of Jack Broughton, who, attaining the championship in 1734, held it till 1750. During these years he sailed on a wave of triumph. He was made one of the Yeomen of the Guard to the King. The royal Duke of Cumberland, his patron, touring the Continent, took him along. At Berlin the regiment of gigantic Grenadiers raised by Frederick the Great passed in review. Broughton was asked what he thought of them.

"Why, your Royal Highness, I should be much pleased to begin with the pivot man and work my way through the whole regiment. Only be kind enough to allow me a breakfast between each battle."

In those remote days they knew less about the strategy of the ring, but they had already acquired the art of fighting through the newspapers. Also the modern letter writing "pug" and his manager might well go to these old timers for points in the use of high sounding invective. A rival fighting showman, George Taylor, feeling that he had been wronged by Broughton, spread broadcast a communication to "the patrons and encouragers of the manly art of boxing," beginning:

"Whereas, Mr. Broughton, well knowing that I was to fight Mr. Field on Tuesday next, the 13th of March, 1743, in order to injure me, has maliciously advertised to open his amphitheatre on that day, and where several battles are to be fought," and ending: "And to show Mr. Broughton that I have no animosity against him as a pugilist, or any jealousy concerning his amphitheatre, I am willing to fight, as soon as he may think proper, wherever it may please him, not regarding, as he loudly sets forth, the strength of his arm."

That strength of arm was sung by Broughton's chronicler, Capt. Godfrey, as follows:

Coordinates Arm and Body.

"He steps as regularly as a swordsman, and carries his blows truly in the line; he steps not back distrustful of himself, to stop a blow, and puddle in the return, with an arm unaided by his body, producing but flyflap blows. No! Broughton steps boldly and firmly in, bids a welcome to the coming blow; receives it with his guardian arm; then, with a general summons of his swelling muscles and his firm body seconding his arm and supplying it with all its weight, pours the pile driving force upon his man."

But all that archaic science did not avail him in his last battle, the one with Slack. Giving the prevailing odds of ten to one, Broughton's patron, the Duke of Cumberland, had wagered ten thousand pounds on his chances. One desperate, chance hit changed the fortunes of the struggle.

"Why, damn you, you're beat!" cried the royal Duke.

"Not beat, your highness, but blind. Only let me see my man and he shall not gain the day yet."

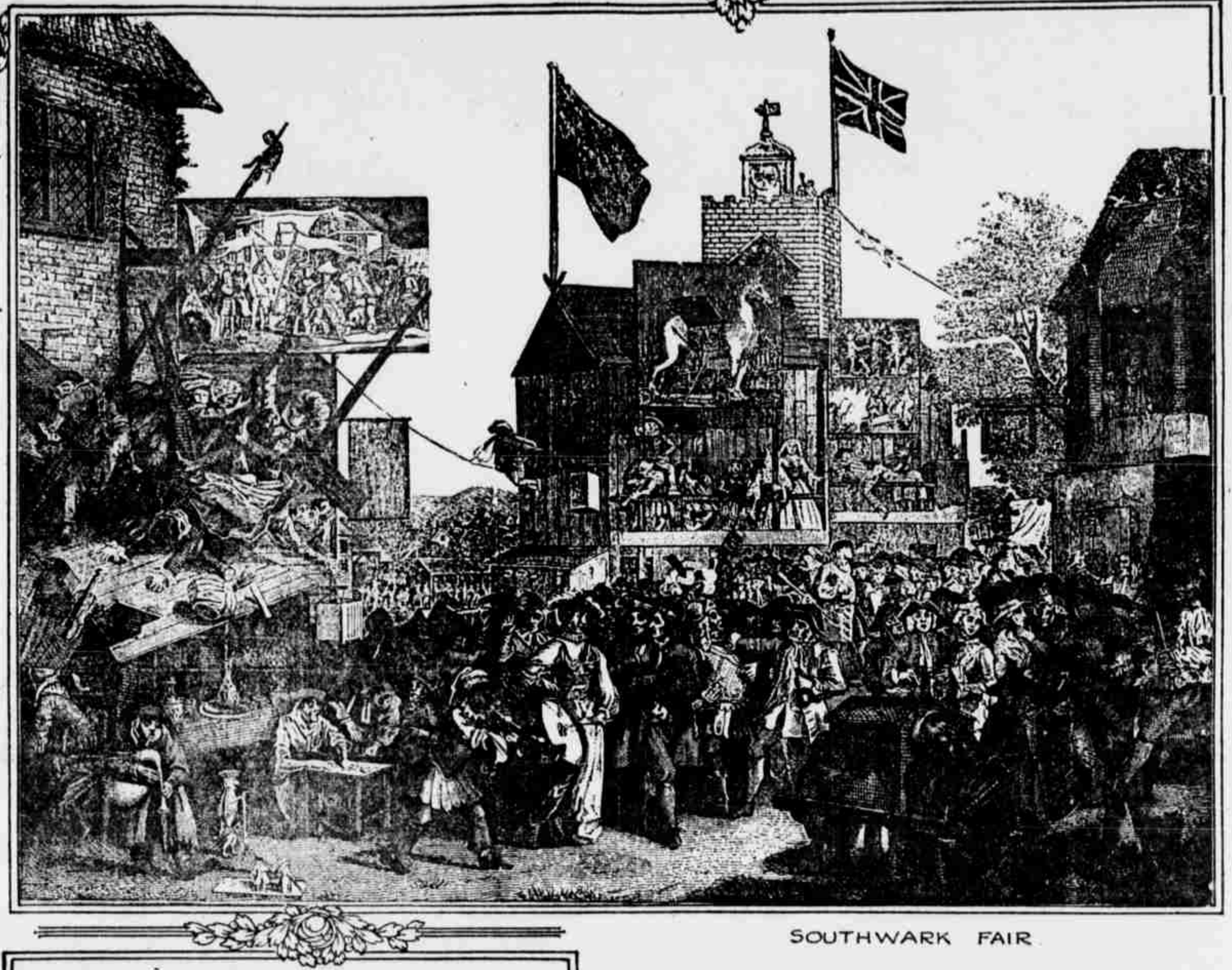
But the Duke turned his back, and Broughton passed from the ring to spend his old age haunting every sale of old pictures and bric-a-brac. Of these last years Conan Doyle has written: "One who saw him has recorded his impression of the silent old gentleman, clad in old fashioned garb, with his catalogue in his hand—Broughton, once the terror of England, and now the harmless and gentle collector."

In all the history of the ring there has probably been no more eccentric personality than John Smith, better known as Buckhorse. He was truly a Hogarthian figure. A contemporary of Figg, fighting on every occasion and with the fury of a stag as early as 1732, he lived into the nineteenth century. Conan Doyle, in his "Rodney Stone," pictured him sitting at the banquet given at the Coach and Horses Tavern by Sir Charles Tregellis to the Corinthians and fighting men of 1803 and entertaining the company with his crooning reminiscences of the old ring days. A naturally homely countenance had been so battered out of shape in the course of his ring career that common expression in eighteenth century London was "as ugly as Buckhorse." Having no beauty to spoil, it was his habit to allow himself to be knocked down for a trifling sum by any one wishing to test the punishing strength of his arm. By striking his own chin he could produce a variety of popular tunes, and in addition he had a bell-like cry that was so singular that Shuter, the celebrated comedian, was obliged night after night to include among his other imitations his mimicry of Buckhorse.

Prestige of Gentleman Jackson.

Modern champions have their reward in easy money winning and notoriety that is worldwide, but no Sullivan or Corbett or Fitzsimmons or Dempsey ever enjoyed a prestige comparable to the prestige of John, "Gentleman," Jackson, who as a principal was engaged in only three ring battles, one of which he lost, and one of which, that with Mendoza for the championship, he won by methods that were exceedingly questionable. This short record was sufficient to establish him as an arbiter of his day. Byron was only the most conspicuous of the young noblemen who sought his society and boasted of it. A note to the 11th canto of "Don Juan" reads: "My friend and corporeal pastor and master, John Jackson, Esquire, professor of pugilism, who I trust still retains the strength and symmetry of his model of a form, together with his good humor, and athletic as well as mental accomplishments." The opening of "Jackson's Rooms" in Old Bond street was literally an era in the gymnastic education of the English aristocracy. Not to have had lessons from Jackson was a reproach. He was known as the "finest formed man in Europe," just as the Prince of Wales, afterward George IV., was known as the "first gentleman in Europe." And sartorially, what a figure of a man it was! Here is a pen picture: "There were the Lades, the Hangars, the Bullocks, the Vernons, but give me Jack Johnson, as he stood all alone amid the throng. I can see him now as I saw him in '84 walking down Holborn Hill toward Smithfield. He had on a scarlet coat worked in gold at the button holes, ruffles and frill of fine lace, a small white stock, no collar (they were not then invented), a looped hat with a broad black band, buff knee breeches, and long silk strings, striped white silk stockings, pumps and paste buckles; his waistcoat was pale blue satin, sprigged with white. It was impossible to look on his fine ample chest, his noble shoulders, his waist (if anything too small), his large but not too large hips, his balustrade calf and beautifully turned but not over delicate ankle, his firm feet and peculiarly small hand, without thinking that nature had sent him on earth as a model. On he went at a good five and a half miles an hour, the envy of all men and the admiration of all women."

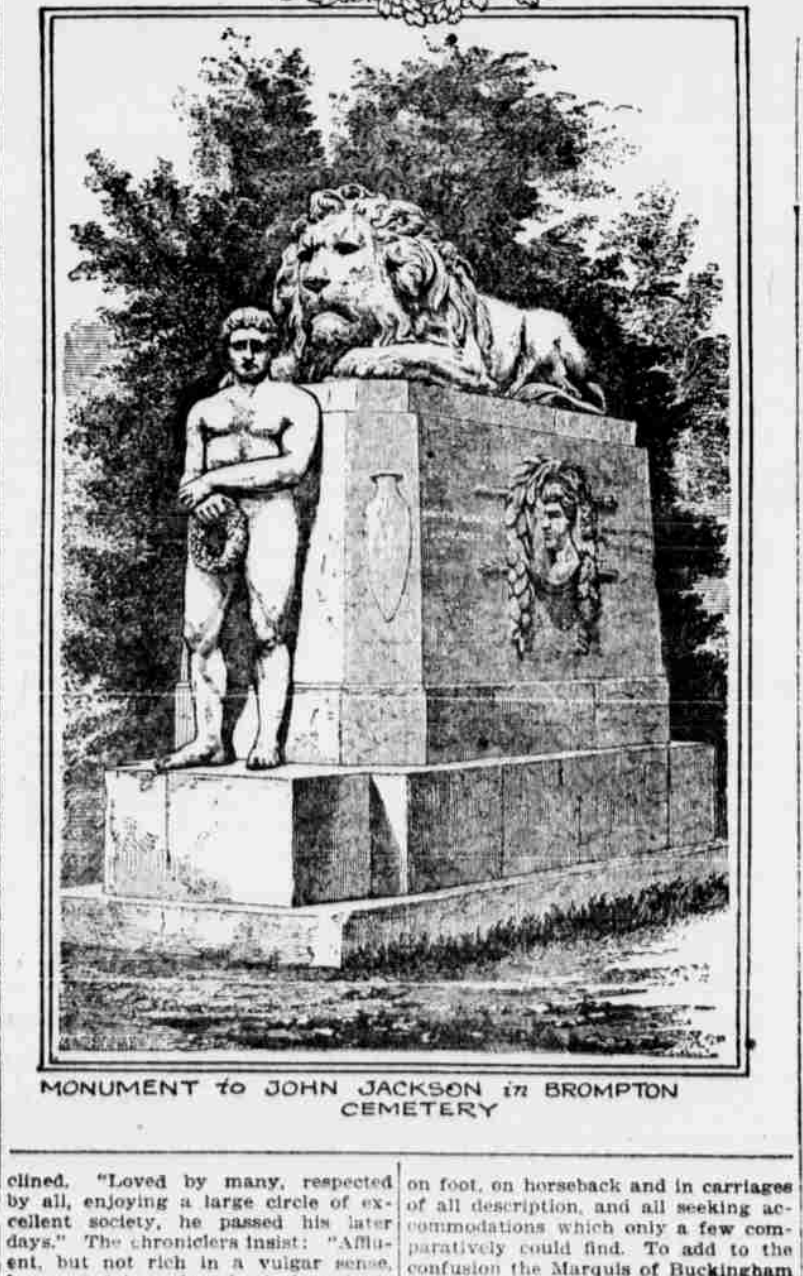
When distinguished foreign visitors came to London Gentleman Jackson was as much of a show as the lions in Trafalgar Square. His services were enlisted for the entertainment of the allied sovereigns in 1814. He presided at a pugilistic fete in the presence of the Emperor of Russia, the King of Prussia, the Prince Royal, Gen. Blucher and others. At the coronation of George IV. in 1821 he was at the head of an unarmed force to preserve order. In 1822 a group of noblemen and gentlemen, with the Duke of Clarence at their head, presented him with a service of plate. When the ring was in its golden age he was always the master of ceremonies at battles of first importance. Then trickery crept in and he retired, and from that moment the ring declined. "Loved by many, respected by all, enjoying a large circle of excellent society, he passed his later days." The chroniclers insist: "Affluent, but not rich in a vulgar sense, he wanted less than he had, and his income exceeded his expenditure."



SOUTHWARK FAIR

Somewhat analogous to the career of Gentleman Jackson was the career of John Gully, who, beginning as a bruiser, became a member of Parliament and whose descendants today are in the English peerage. Both men fought three battles and were defeated in one of them. Gully's ring prominence belonged to the years 1805-1808. He had been beaten by Pearce, the "Game Chicken," but when Pearce retired Gully was looked upon as his natural successor. In defence of the championship thus acquired he twice fought and beat Bob Gregson, first in the valley on the Newmarket road known as Sim Mile Bottom, and again at Woburn, in the county of Bucks. The Marquis of Buckingham, His Majesty's Custos Rotulorum for Bucks, announced his intention of preventing the second battle, and the following account of the preliminaries, taken from an old file of the London *Morning Chronicle*, gives a vivid picture of the difficulties of going to a fight in the first decade of eighteenth century Merrie England.

"Some hundreds, whose leisure and disposition prompted them to be in action, started on the Saturday and Sunday and secured beds and stabling in all the villages and hamlets contiguous to Woburn. The town of Woburn was on Monday in continual motion, all was uproar and confusion, people of all ranks continually arriving on foot, on horseback and in carriages of all description, and all seeking accommodations which only a few comparatively could find. To add to the confusion the Marquis of Buckingham did not fail to exert himself for the fulfilment of his threat; all the magistracy of Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire, at the head of their constables and *posse commitatus*, with a subsidiary force of volunteers from the surrounding districts, appeared determined to resist this unlicensed incursion into their territories, and to stand an insurmountable barrier to the amusement. The Dunstable volunteers were out very early on the Monday morning, with drums beating, colors flying, cartouch boxes doubly provided, bayonets fixed, and all in awful military array. The peasantry were shaking with fear, supposing the French had landed, and those who had arrived began to think they were hoaxed and that they should return without being gratified by the fight.



MONUMENT to JOHN JACKSON in BROMPTON CEMETERY

"When Monday night arrived hundreds had flocked into the town and all were eagerly inquiring for beds. Nothing could be obtained of this kind for the night's lodging under 30 shillings a head, and to sit or lie on the chairs of the public rooms the usual price of a bed was extorted. In one room at Woburn fifteen gentlemen laid on the floor and were happy to pay for this hard fare, and hundreds reposed in their carriages. The horses, notwithstanding the weather was severe, were obliged to stand without covering. Tuesday came, and those glorious comforts were yet to be endured; pay the price asked you must, as the landlord was generally sharp enough to secure the boots of every traveller if he had nothing else to lay hold of for security.

"About 5 o'clock on the Wednesday morning all was again in commotion, and notwithstanding the endeavors of the magistrates a ring was formed on Ashley Common, raised with sods about 12 inches from the ground and about 40 feet in circumference. Between 6 and 7 o'clock many of the amateurs came dashing direct from London in their barouches and four, and in order to direct them to the proper spot Bill Richmond was placed at The Magpie. The multitude soon got the hint and followed the bangup leaders. By 9 o'clock a number of carriages had arrived and were safely penned up. The amateurs viewed the ring and were expressing their high approbation at its appearance when a messenger arrived with fresh information that the magistrates had seen the ring in the morning and were still determined to prevent the battle. Many of the knowing ones suspected that this was a hoax and immediately sent off an express to Hogstale, a public house about a mile distant, where Gregson held his headquarters.

Would Not Fight There.

"Before the answer, however, returned Mendoza, dressed in green and mounted in style, dashed up with two or three well known amateurs and gave positive assurance that the battle would not be fought there. Upon this solemn assurance every one started for Gregson's lodgings, where they found the hero seated in Lord Barrymore's barouche, with the horses' heads turned toward Woburn, and escorted by about 150 noblemen and gentlemen on horseback and an immense retinue of gigs, tandems, curricles and every species of vehicle. Hundreds not apprised of the change in the seat of combat were advancing from Woburn. Soon the two streams met and, forming one almost irresistible current, returned through Woburn with accumulated force, the knowing ones leading the way, having been before apprised that in case of any unforeseen disappointment at the original spot they were to rendezvous at several places in reversion; the first of which was Sir John Sebright's, in Hertfordshire, about seventeen miles distant from Ashley Common, the whole extent of which was covered by one solid mass of passengers, and although many had sorely repented their expedition and returned homeward the multitude appeared not the least diminished. Broken down carriages obstructed the road; knocked-up horses fell and could not be got any further; a guinea a mile was offered for conveyance, and many hundreds of gentlemen were happy in being jolted in brick carts for a shilling a mile. By 2 o'clock they arrived at Sir John Sebright's park; a flat spot immediately opposite the house, but about half a mile distant, was pitched for the battle, and upon the whole the uninvited guests behaved with tolerable decorum. A ring was formed, the exterior circle was nearly an acre, surrounded by a triple ring of horsemen and a double row of pedestrians, who, notwithstanding the wetness of the ground, laid down with great pleasure, and the 40 foot ring was soon completed.

"About 3 o'clock a torrent of rain poured down, and every one began to be anxious for the fight; very shortly after Gregson, Gully, Mendoza, Harry Lee, Joe Ward, Hen Pearce, Cribb, Horton, Dutch Sam, Cropley, Gibbons, Richmond and several other pugilists and amateurs entered the ring. It is impossible to describe the pleasure that beamed in the eyes of every spectator at this moment, and the welkin echoed their repeated plaudits."

Gully, after winning the battle, retired and became a tavern keeper. From turf speculations due to his own sound judgment he acquired a fortune that enabled him to buy the fine estate of Ware Park, Hertfordshire. He established a racing stable and purchased two or three collieries. Then in 1832 in the first reformed Parliament he was returned as representative for Pontefract. Of one of his dinners in the latter year a famous sportsman recorded: "The turbot came from Billingsgate by express, and the haunch from his own park. Moet purveyed the champagne, Marjoribanks the port, and Griffiths the Lafitte."

The Napoleon of the Ring.

For sheer ring genius none of the men mentioned was to be compared to Jem Belcher of Bristol, who set the fashion in the neckwear of his time just as the names of the Duke of Wellington and Gen. Blucher were given to makes of boots of the period. When Belcher's followers acclaimed him as the "Napoleon of the ring" it was considered unpatriotic, as by inference conferring too much distinction upon the French Emperor. As the purport of this article is to deal with the personalities of the men of the ring outside the ring reference to his battles shall be brief.

Just as young Bonaparte routed the Austrian Generals by departing from all established rules for waging battle, so Belcher, going from Bristol to London as a stripling of 17, within four years had beaten the best and biggest men that could be found to face him by scorning all the scientific systems then in vogue and trusting to his own natural style. When at the zenith of his fame he met with a terrible accident. While playing racquets he was struck in the eye by a racquet ball, which completely destroyed the sight of the eye. Thus handicapped he felt that all hope of holding the championship was gone, but, determined that the belt should pass to no one but a Bristolian, he sent for his friend, Hen Pearce, the "Game Chicken," to take his place as holder of the title.

Readers of Conan Doyle's "Rodney Stone," which has been called the best novel ever written about the prize ring, will undoubtedly remember Boy Jim Harrison's introduction to pugilism, his fight in the coach house with the redoubtable Joe Berks. That episode was taken direct from the "Game Chicken's" career. One night, when he was comfortably in bed asleep, Hen Pearce was roused and bidden to dress at once, as he had been backed by some of the Corinthians to fight Berks. He obeyed the call, and at midnight, by candle light, in a room at Will Warr's, the One Tun, in Jermyn street, he stripped to do battle with his formidable foe. Berks made light of Pearce's pretensions, spoke of him as a "thread paper fighter" and backed himself to lick "this boy of Belcher's" inside a quarter of an hour. But he soon found that he had caught a Tartar.

Gave Name to Neckwear.

Belcher gave his name to a style in neckwear. A later hero of the British ring gave his name to a Colonial settlement, a popular liqueur, a famous racehorse and a new bishopric. That was the man known as Bendigo. His real name was William Thompson and he was born in Nottingham in 1811. Bendigo came thus: He was one of a triplet of sons whom some waggish acquaintance of the Thompsons dubbed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The last named was the fighter. At first he was known as "Abednego," and was so styled in a paragraph advertisement in *Bell's Life* appearing in 1835. The name was subsequently shortened to "Begnego" and finally corrupted into "Bendigo." Bendigo's fistic fame rests upon his two battles with Ben Caunt, but long after he retired from the ring he was a personally known throughout England. Even to recent years stories of his eccentricities were still current in Nottingham. Finally he became Exhibit A of the revivalists.

He was hawked about the country as a converted character, and the announcement that he was to preach and pray drew thousands. Attired in a black coat and white tie, his hair, always straight and sleek, plastered down, he was the star at revival meetings. Once the sporting Lord Longford met him in Oxford street, and stopping the ex-champion, gazed in amazement at his appearance, and asked: "Hullo, Bendy! What's your little game now?" "Truly, my lord," replied Bendigo, "I am now fighting Satan, and behold Scripture says the victory shall be mine." "Hope so, Bendy," said Lord Longford, "but pray fight Satan more fairly than you did Ben Caunt, or else I shall change sides, and all my sympathies will be with Old Nick." "My lord," answered Bendigo, "you backed me against Ben Caunt, and I won your money, so you've no cause to complain. I beat Caunt and I mean to beat the devil, so you had better back me again."

Black Diamond and Yokel.

Many of those personalities of the old ring died young. Belcher at 30, the "Game Chicken" at 32, Hooper the Tinman, at 31; Turner at 35; Josh Hudson, the John Bull fighter, at 39; Randall, the Nonpareil, at 34. Others when they did reach maturity, their lives took the strangest turns. Gully, Member of Parliament; Broughton, art collector, and Bendigo, revivalist, have been mentioned. Richard Humphries, the Gentleman Boxer, who thrice fought Mendoza, losing twice, developed into a successful coal merchant. Jem Ward, the London Black Diamond, became a painter of considerable repute. He said of himself that he could do all that Turner did in color and "atmosphere" which he considered his forte, though he confessed that Turner surpassed him in detail. An episode in the Black Diamond's career illustrates the degraded state of the British prize ring after it

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